

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**A WAR LIKE NO OTHER: AL QAEDA AND THE U.S. STRATEGY FOR COMBATING  
TERRORISM**

by

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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<b>Report Documentation Page</b>			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE <b>15 MAR 2006</b>	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2005 to 00-00-2006</b>		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>War Like No Other Al Qaeda and the U.S. Strategy for Combating Terrorism</b>			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) <b>John Pollock</b>			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College,Carlisle Barracks,Carlisle,PA,17013-5050</b>			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT <b>See attached.</b>				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: a. REPORT      b. ABSTRACT      c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b> <b>unclassified</b> <b>unclassified</b>			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>24</b>
				19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

## **ABSTRACT**

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TITLE: A War Like No Other: Al Qaeda and the U.S. Strategy for Combating Terrorism

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 12 Dec 2005 WORD COUNT: 7680 PAGES: 24

KEY TERMS: Counter Insurgency Operations, Counter Terrorism

CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

September 11th was a watershed event and catapulted the United States into a war unique in our history. Al Qaeda and Associated Networks (AQAN) have proven to be imaginative and ruthless foes with a long term asymmetric erosion strategy targeted at the will of the American people. The intent of this strategy is to affect the withdrawal of U.S. influence from the Middle East in order to hasten the fall of corrupt, autocratic regimes in the region and establish an Islamic Caliphate. The U.S. strategy while well crafted to attack terrorist organizations and protect the homeland does not sufficiently address some of the underlying causes of terrorism, is too state centric, and lacks a cultural perspective.



## A WAR LIKE NO OTHER: AL QAEDA AND THE U.S. STRATEGY FOR COMBATING TERRORISM

Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brezinski clearly defines the challenges associated with the United States' campaign in the Global War on Terror and the second and third order effects this campaign has caused throughout the world when he writes:

September 11, 2001, was a seminal event in the history of power politics. Nineteen fanatics, not all of whom had western education, with scant financial resources, plunged the world's mightiest and most technologically advanced power into panic and precipitated a global political crisis.

The aftereffects of their act militarized U.S. foreign policy, accelerated Russia's western orientation, eventually prompted growing fissures between America and Europe, intensified America's economic malaise, and altered the traditional American definition of civil rights. The weapons with which they accomplished all that were merely some box-cutters and a willingness to forfeit their own lives. Never before had so much pain been inflicted on so powerful many by so impotent few.

Therein lies the dilemma for the world's only superpower: how to cope with an enemy that is physically weak but endowed with a fanatical motivation. Unless the sources of the motivation are diluted, attempts to thwart and eliminate the enemy will be to no avail. Hatred will breed replenishment. The foe can only be eliminated through a sensitive recognition of motives and passions that are not precisely defined but are derived from a shared quest of the militant weak to destroy - at all costs - the object of their resentful zeal.<sup>1</sup>

This is a war unlike the United States has ever faced, not one of division-on-division, linear engagements, not one of air strikes against fielded conventional forces, nor one that will one day result in the formal or unconditional surrender of a recognized government or uniformed foe. But, this is a war. A war against an adversary who views his commitment as total, who seems to view no course of action as morally unacceptable and one who has a very clear understanding of his opponent. While most may not consider Osama Bin Laden a military or grand strategist, it is clear that since his declaration of war against the United States in 1996, he has planned and executed a very effective and imaginative strategy against the United States. In contrast, the U.S. National Strategy for Combating Terrorism appears to confront the issue of Jihadist extremism with more conventional tools and mechanisms of statecraft that may or may not effectively deal with the issue. This paper will examine the threat posed by Al Qaeda and associated networks (AQAN), explore the similarity of Bin Laden's strategic thought to other more well known classical military strategists and theorists, provide an assessment of his chances for success if left unchecked, detail the U.S. strategy to counter the threat posed by

Jihadist Extremists, and provide an analysis of the United States' chances for strategic success in the Global War on Terrorism.

### The Threat

Bin Laden founded Al Qaeda in Peshwar, Pakistan in 1989 as an off shoot of the Office of Services, a jihad recruiting and support network formed during the Afghan War against the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Upon the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990, Bin Laden offered the services of his forces to the Saudi Royal family in the defense of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Royal family rejected Bin Laden's proposal and instead opted for the deployment of U.S. forces into the kingdom. The rejection of an Islamic force in favor of the introduction of non believers into the Land of the Two Holy Sites alienated Bin Laden from the Saudi Royal family and hastened his departure for the Sudan.<sup>3</sup> It was in 1996, while living in the Sudan that Bin Laden was finally recognized by U.S. intelligence as a chief financier of extremist organizations throughout the Middle East, and when the U.S. government showed an interest in apprehending Bin Laden, he returned to the sanctuary of Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> In 1998, Bin Laden held a press conference in Khost, Afghanistan unveiling an organization titled the International Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, an organization founded according to Bin Laden because of the U.S. occupation of Saudi Arabia. The central tenet of the organization was "the judgment to kill and fight Americans and their allies, whether civilian or military as an obligation for every Muslim who is able to do so in any country."<sup>5</sup> The attacks against U.S. Rangers in Somalia in 1993, the Khobar towers in 1996, the East African Embassies in 1998, the USS Cole in 2000, and the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon in 2001, all bear witness to the effectiveness of Al Qaeda's operations in this regard.

These attacks were conducted by an organization with a unique organizational structure. One with a tight, hierachial system at the top, but one characterized by dispersal and decentralized control at its lower levels. Some analysts have described Al Qaeda as an organization of concentric circles with leadership figures occupying the central inner circle, with militant regional allies such as the Taliban, Chechens, Kashmiri's, Uzbeks (and now Saudis, Iraqis, and Syrians) occupying the next layer with the outside circle composed of supporters from proselytizing groups, international Islamic charities, radical mosques and education centers, and political parties from across the Moslem world.<sup>6</sup>

The three main Islamic religious sects that support the Jihadist movement are Salafism, Wahhabism, and a radical subset of Salafism - Al Takfir Wal Hijra. While all three support the

return of Muslim society to the 7<sup>th</sup> century Caliphate, Al Takfir Wal Hijra has proven to be the most controversial within the Muslim world.

Al Takfir Wal Hijra originated in Egypt in the 1960s as an off shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Believing that much of the world is heretical, members of this movement adhere to a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam, and aim to return to a true Islamic society, recreating a 7<sup>th</sup> century Caliphate based on Sharia law. This interpretation calls ridding the world of infidels and Kufar or heretics to include Arabs or Muslims who do not live to strict Takfiri religious standards. These individuals are guided by the fatwas of radical clerics and have been responsible for attacks against Syria, the Sudan, Lebanese Christian and Muslim communities, and Moroccan Muslim civilians<sup>7</sup>

Similar to the concept of “viral Al Qaeda”, Al Takfir Wal Hijra is a web of Islamic militants who share a common ideology, whose connection is through those common beliefs vice an organizational structure. As an ideology, it operates without any sort of central structure and it has been very difficult to identify leaders or estimate numbers of followers of the ideology. Although most experts believe that Takfir Al Hijra operates independently, many of Al Qaeda’s most prominent members such as Ayman Al Zawahiri, Mohammed Atta, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, Ramzi Yousef, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed are all thought to be proponents of Takfiri extremist beliefs.<sup>8</sup> This position is reinforced by Dr. Mamoun Fandy, Egyptian-born professor of politics and senior fellow at the James A. Baker III Institute of Public Policy, who has stated that, “Takfir is very central to the Al Qaeda movement”.<sup>9</sup> The targeting of the Iraqi Shia and other civilians, ritual videotaped beheadings, and the recent attacks against Muslim civilians in Jordan all are significant evidence of the effect of Takfiri religious thought on Al Qaeda operations.

Having identified the history, organizational structure, and religious underpinnings of Al Qaeda and associated networks, what are the strategic objectives of this movement?

Bin Laden and Al Qaeda’s strategic objective is to establish a Caliphate in the Middle East, returning Muslim society to the ancient ways of pure Islam as practiced by the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century. In order to do so, Al Qaeda must overthrow regimes they consider “apostate” or “idolaters,” such as the Saudi Royal Family in Riyadh, Mubarak in Cairo, the Jordanian Royal Family in Amman, and Musharref in Islamabad. Al Qaeda considers these regimes to be the “near enemy,” supported with financial and military backing by the United States, whom they consider the “far enemy.”<sup>10</sup>

To break this down into a more recognizable military construct of purpose, method, and end state, the purpose of Bin Laden’s operations is the overthrow of the apostate regimes and the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East. One could postulate that his strategic

method is a two phased approach to draw the United States into a protracted costly campaign in Afghanistan and through unintended good fortune, now Iraq. This strategy is supported by a sophisticated information campaign highlighting the U.S. military's ineffectiveness against extremist elements, extensive collateral damage, disregard for the welfare of non combatants, and the brutality and unjust tactics of U.S. forces fighting insurgent elements in order to discredit America in the eyes of the world. Simultaneously, his strategy calls for isolating the United States from its allies by undertaking terrorist operations against civilian targets in those nations in order to force their withdrawal from the U.S. led coalition in the Global War on Terrorism. Phase one ends with the United States isolated and U.S. support withdrawn from apostate regimes in the Middle East. Phase Two consists of active terrorist operations against the governmental infrastructure of the apostate regimes in order to demonstrate Al Qaeda's strength and the government's inability to counter those operations. This phase of the operation will also be supported by a sophisticated information campaign that highlights the corruption and inefficiency of the government, portrayed in propaganda as a cause and effect relationship. Phase two ends with the overthrow of the targeted regimes by extremist elements. Bin Laden's desired end state would consist of the establishment of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Caliphate in the Middle East, apostate governments overthrown and the United States discredited and withdrawn from the Middle East.

But, the question is, "how to get there?" That is the essence of strategy. One could argue that although not a school trained military thinker, Bin Laden is intuitively an exceptional strategist and his strategic thought blends many of the concepts and ideas of current and historical strategists and theorists as described in the following paragraphs.

In, "*On War*", Carl Von Clausewitz writes that:

As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a remarkable trinity-composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone....The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of the government alone.<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt that Bin Laden understands the Trinitarian nature of the United States and western democracies as it relates to war. Bin Laden effectively targeted the passions inherent to the people on September 11<sup>th</sup>, thus, effecting the government and in turn the military response to that attack. One may surmise that the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> were designed at

least in part to draw the American military into Afghanistan, an area in which the extremists were intimately familiar and operationally successful against the Soviets. Ironically, Bin Laden could continue to influence U.S. passions against the war effort by engaging the U.S. in a long costly campaign in Afghanistan with every operational failure highlighted in the world media. Some would claim that giving Bin Laden the strategic vision to draw the United States into Afghanistan is overstating his capabilities, while others disagree. The timing of the assassination of Northern Alliance Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud two days prior to the attack on the United States was too coincidental not to have been a designed shaping operation to deny the United States a highly capable ally against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

But there was a second target of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack, the passions inherent to the people of the Middle East. The events of that day were primarily an Al Qaeda recruiting campaign designed to show that the United States was a vulnerable colossus, who was not immune to the power of Al Qaeda and that change in U.S. policy was a possibility. This was a call to jihad for moderate Moslems who, although sympathetic to the cause, had continued to sit on the side lines during Al Qaeda's earlier, less spectacular operations.<sup>12</sup>

Bin Laden has continued to play effectively on the passions of the people as evidenced by several different terrorist operations. The train bombings in Madrid, after which the people of Spain elected an anti war government, and also the Phillipino hostage crisis in Iraq, after which the Philippine government withdrew its forces from Iraq due to domestic pressure at home are both clear examples of the ability of Transnational Jihadists to effect public policy decisions.

Finally, in regard to Bin Laden's perceptive approach regarding the influence of the American populace on war, the United States has not suffered another attack on the homeland since September 11<sup>th</sup>. One has to ask whether this is because of improved intelligence and security procedures or is Bin Laden satisfied with the relatively negative perception of U.S. operations both at home and abroad as related to the GWOT? To initiate another attack on the U.S. homeland may reignite the passion of the people and support for more aggressive military operations against Al Qaeda; resulting in a decisive engagement that may be counter productive to Bin Laden's long term strategy.

Clausewitz's concept of center of gravity is another idea that Bin Laden seems to clearly understand. In, "On War", Clausewitz writes:

Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point at which all our energies should be directed.<sup>13</sup>

While Clausewitz's definition of the center of gravity is one which U.S. doctrine is based, in Clausewitz's theory, center of gravity prosecution is based on attacking strength with strength. Bin Laden's approach to the United States' center of gravity is more in keeping with the modern maneuverist's approach of attacking a center of gravity via a critical vulnerability. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication-1 defines a critical vulnerability as, "a vulnerability that if exploited, will do the most significant damage to the enemy's ability to resist us." Bin Laden may view our ability to project and engage with overwhelming combat power rapidly anywhere in the world as our center of gravity. Thus, he will look for a complementary critical vulnerability to defeat our center of gravity. The critical vulnerability that Bin Laden has chosen is our public will as outlined in his 1996 "Declaration of Jihad" in which he stated, "...your most disgraceful case was in Somalia...When tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu, you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you...the extent of your impotence and weakness became very clear."<sup>14</sup> Bin Laden has rarely taken on U.S. combat forces in large scale pitched battles, preferring to utilize suicide bombers, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDS), and Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) to cause massive casualties to U.S. and coalition forces, effect in the media, and to incur minor risk to his extremist elements. He is well aware of our perceived aversion to casualties and distaste for long term conflict, best summarized by General George C. Marshall when he stated that, "a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years War."<sup>15</sup> Bin Laden is currently controlling the strategic and operational tempo in both Afghanistan and Iraq. By not engaging U.S. forces in large scale combat operations he is able to husband his limited combat power for a long term campaign while causing a "low flow", but steady stream of U.S. casualties, further eroding our will to continue.

He is also very cognizant of the negative effect that brutal repressive tactics have had on the public's perception of a conflict. The actions of the British towards the Boers, the Black and Tans toward the Irish during the Irish Rebellion, and the actions of the French Paras in Algiers were all incidents that negatively affected the public's support of relatively successful military operations.<sup>16</sup> Our alleged excesses at Abu Ghraib and at Guantanamo have been leveraged by Bin Laden via the world media to further his cause and have significantly damaged U.S. credibility around the world.

In summary, while the focus of this section has been on center of gravity analysis and associated critical vulnerabilities Bin Laden's strategy could also be considered a strategy of "Psychological Accumulation" or an "Information Tonnage War" to modify the concept of Captain J.C. Wylie, USN.<sup>17</sup> While Bin Laden may not be having a direct effect on our center of gravity,

the psychological cumulative effect of casualties, no clear battlefield successes in a long and drawn out campaign, and alleged excesses against detainees, may ultimately erode our public will to continue the fight. One only need examine the historical analogy of Vietnam, in 1975, where the United States after over 10 years of combat against the communist insurgency, failed to come to the aid of the Republic of South Vietnam when invaded by conventional North Vietnamese units. One may assume that Bin Laden is attempting a similar strategy against the United States. A strategy in which through the erosion or exhaustion of the American public's will, the United States is reticent to come to the aid of our allies in the Middle East when threatened by militant Islam.

While Bin Laden possesses an intuitive understanding of Clausewitzian thought as it relates to the Trinitarian nature of war, center of gravity, and even possibly the concept of a strategic culminating point in the form of an erosion strategy, one can see reflected in his strategic execution an appreciation of the indirect approach as espoused by Liddell Hart.

Awaiting a change in the balance of force-a change often sought and achieved by draining the enemy's force, weakening him by pricks instead of risking blows. The essential condition of such a strategy is that the drain on him should be disproportionately greater than the drain on oneself. The object may be sought by raiding his supplies; by local attacks which annihilate or inflict disproportionate loss on parts of his force; by luring him into unprofitable attacks; by causing an excessively wide distribution of his force; and, no least by, by exhausting his moral and physical energy.<sup>18</sup>

The tactics used by Al Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan are very much the pricks vice blows that Liddell Hart describes. These attacks are usually executed against soft non military targets in an effort to lower morale, depict the government as impotent and bleed off coalition casualties. In a strategic sense, the attacks against the Egyptian Red Sea resorts, the London subway, Madrid, and the World Trade Center are all examples of attacks that caused the disproportionate loss both physically and psychologically that Liddell Hart describes. Finally, one cannot make the case that Bin Laden and Al Qaeda lured the United States into attacking Saddam Hussein's Iraq. However, once the initial attack was executed and a sizeable U.S. force was tasked with occupying Iraq, there is no doubt that Bin Laden saw this as a serendipitous opportunity to open a new front, engaging a sizeable U.S. force over a very large area for an extended period of time. By engaging the United States in Iraq as well as Afghanistan, Bin Laden may be able to accelerate his erosion/exhaustion strategy against the United States. Can these type operations cause the change in the balance of forces between the United States and Al Qaeda that Liddell Hart describes? Only time will tell, but there is an extremely negative perception, both at home and abroad, of the Iraq campaign that has

damaged U.S. credibility extensively in the GWOT. Damaged credibility will only make the United States' task more difficult should it attempt to build future alliances if Bin Laden and Al Qaeda attempt to overthrow the apostate regimes in the Middle East, or should the U.S. attempt to persuade other nations to shoulder some of the burden in Iraq. Damaged credibility has a detrimental effect at home as well, thus making it that much more difficult to stay the long term course in Iraq.

To further support the idea of Bin Laden as a proponent of the indirect approach and maneuver warfare, one only need look to the writings of modern maneuver strategist Bill Lind.

maneuver warfare involves radical decentralization of authority....How can this be done without creating chaos...? Through another of maneuver warfare's central concepts: Auftragstaktik, or mission tactics....it involves telling a subordinate what result he is to obtain, usually defined in terms of effect on the enemy.<sup>19</sup>

While Bin Laden's strategy is replete with examples of maneuver warfare theory (concepts such as surfaces and gaps, critical vulnerability, strength vs. weakness, etc.) a facet both impressive and adaptive is the decentralization of Al Qaeda operations post September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. U.S. and allied attacks against Al Qaeda leadership have caused a mutation of Al Qaeda from a hierachal organization into what has been described as Al Qaedaism or viral Al Qaeda. Under this concept, decentralized cells, acting on loosely based strategic guidance from Al Qaeda leadership figures, disseminated in video and audio tapes or the internet, execute locally planned operations against western or coalition targets.<sup>20</sup> These attacks, based on the concept of "commander's intent" have been difficult to prevent because they are planned and executed locally, many times by cells that have not yet been identified, and thus, the "chatter" normally seen in advance of a terrorist attack is undetected. Additionally, because attacks of this nature require no approval process, attacks can be planned and executed by multiple cells over a wide variety of areas.

In conclusion, Osama Bin Laden has intuitively melded Clausewitzian classical theory, Liddell Hart's "indirect approach", modern maneuver theory, and in the opinion of LtCol Michael F. Morris, elements of insurgent mass mobilization and armed action strategies in pursuit of his strategic objectives.<sup>21</sup> His perceived success, in the face of overwhelming conventional military power, has struck a chord with many in Middle Eastern society. Having made the case that he is a strategist, the next question is, if left unchecked, can he win? Morris tends to think not based on a policy strategy mismatch. Although he believes that Al Qaeda's erosion strategy against the "far enemy", in the form of the United States is sound, the lack of a political base required in armed action strategy against the "near enemies" will lead to long term failure. In his words,

"The unlimited political objective associated with the constrained military means creates a fatal policy-strategy mismatch that dooms the insurgency to failure."<sup>22</sup>

There are examples that suggest otherwise, however. Looking back at the Iranian Revolution in 1979, militant Islamists were able to overthrow a western oriented, prosperous and militarily capable U.S. ally. What makes us think that the Saudi's, Egyptians, Pakistani's or Jordanians might not end up with a similar fate? Historically, there have been other examples of "revolutions" whose armed component significantly overshadowed its political infrastructure until the later stages of the insurgency. It is still early in the play of this problem, and the longer Bin Laden stays alive, maintains the support of the Ummah, and his insurgent movement survives in Afghanistan, Iraq, and in almost 60 other countries around the world, he will continue to gain converts, and AQAN momentum.

#### The United States' Strategy for Combating Terrorism

Having described AQAN's objectives, Bin Laden's strategic campaign plan, and the consequences of his success, this portion of paper will outline the President's National Strategy for Combating Terrorism from the perspective of ends, ways, and means, examine the feasibility of the strategy's success and offer some possible modifications to that strategy.

The intent of the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, also known as the "ends", is to "stop terrorist attacks against the United States, its citizens, its interests, and our friends and allies around the world and ultimately, to create an international environment inhospitable to terrorists and all those who support them".<sup>23</sup> In order to meet this end state, the President envisions acting on four fronts, otherwise known as the four "Ds" strategy. These "4Ds" – defeat, deny, diminish, defend - can be considered the strategic "ways" that the President intends to utilize in the execution of his strategy.

The first front is to defeat terrorist organizations of global reach by simultaneously attacking their sanctuaries; leadership; command, control, communications, military support and finance. These attacks are designed to cause second and third order effects, denying them funding, safe haven, leadership and the ability to command and control and plan further operations. The dislocation of these networks will make them vulnerable to regional security elements, supported by the United States government.<sup>24</sup> Under this primary goal, the strategy outlines three subordinate objectives.

The first is to identify terrorists and terrorist organizations. The strategy envisions a partnership between the law enforcement and intelligence community in order to identify terrorists and organizations, map their command and control, and to support infrastructure

protection. Collection efforts and assets are to be focused on organizations with global reach, and most importantly, those attempting to acquire Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Information on these groups is to be given the widest distribution through federal, state, and local agencies, as well as international allies.<sup>25</sup>

The second subordinate objective, closely related to the first, is to locate terrorists and their organizations. The strategy recognizes that the United States Government (USG) is not well postured to collect against terrorist organizations and directs a review and expansion of technical and Human Intelligence (HUMINT) assets arrayed against the target set. The strategy also acknowledges that regional partners are often better postured to collect against these organizations and directs increased cooperation in this endeavor.<sup>26</sup>

The third objective is to destroy terrorists and their organizations. This will be undertaken by law enforcement agencies to apprehend and prosecute terrorists, military assets to defeat terrorist networks globally and finally with the cooperation of international partners, to eliminate the sources of terrorist finances.<sup>27</sup>

The second front described in the “4D” strategy is to deny terrorist organizations sponsorship, support or sanctuary within other nation states. The strategy envisions States accepting responsibility per United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1373 and twelve other UN counterterrorism conventions to take action against terrorist organizations operating from that countries sovereign territory. The USG strategy envisions a number of different options in working with other nations and international institutions in the war on terror. This portion of the strategy is supported by three subordinate strategic objectives.<sup>28</sup>

The first objective is to end the state sponsorship of terrorism. The U.S. State Dept is the designated lead in this endeavor and is tasked with producing incentives and disincentives for states to forego their support of terrorism. This portion of the strategy outlines a zero tolerance policy for terrorism, sets high standards of state conduct in the terrorism arena, and directs the promulgation of these policy goals through public and diplomatic channels.<sup>29</sup>

The second subordinate objective related to this portion of the strategy calls for international accountability with regard to combating terrorism. This aspect calls for the use of international institutions and resolutions, specifically, UNSCR 1373 and 12 other international conventions to freeze terrorist financing, prohibit nationals from contributing to terrorist organizations, deny safe haven, and takes steps to prevent the movement of terrorists.<sup>30</sup>

States able and willing are envisioned as partners, those willing, but unable, are considered as candidates for support in building the internal institutions and organizations required for the fight. States that are reluctant will be convinced to support the various

international counter terrorism initiatives via diplomatic pressure brought to bear by the U.S. and its allies. Finally, states that are unwilling to support the GWOT will be compelled to cease their support of terrorism and any threat they pose will be decisively countered.<sup>31</sup>

This portion of the strategy also calls for the interdiction and disruption of material support for terrorists, holding states fully accountable for their borders, especially in the areas of WMD proliferation, money laundering, and drug trafficking.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the strategy calls for the USG, in conjunction with regional allies, to root out and destroy terrorist organizations and to establish international standards of behavior and systems to eliminate terrorist refuges.<sup>33</sup>

The third front the strategy describes is the U.S. led international effort to diminish the conditions that terrorists seek to exploit. The strategy envisions a significant role for the international community in this arena; therefore the USG wants to keep terrorism at the forefront of the international agenda, in order to leverage commitment from other nations, for the foreseeable future. There are 2 subordinate objectives to this portion of the strategy.<sup>34</sup> The first is to partner with the international community to strengthen weak states and prevent the reemergence of terrorism by expanding bi/multilateral relationships in the promotion of good government, the rule of law, anti-corruption, and economic growth. Additionally, a nation's stand on terrorism will be tied to U.S. foreign aid. The second subordinate objective is to win the war of ideas by working with international partners to de-legitimize terrorism, to support and promote moderate Muslim governments and to work towards a solution of the Israel-Palestine issue.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, the fourth front described in the strategy calls for the USG to defend the United States, its citizens, and its interests at home and abroad by protecting the homeland, and undertaking a proactive defense to neutralize threats as early as possible. The five subordinate objectives of this element of the strategy call for greater cooperation between, intelligence, military, and law enforcement agencies and organizations, an integrated effort between the Counterterrorism Strategy and Homeland Security Strategy, improved domain awareness to identify threats as early as possible prior to execution of a terrorist attack, the protection of critical informational and physical infrastructure and borders and comprehensive integrated measures to protect U.S. citizens abroad, and an incident management capability integrated across all elements of the USG.<sup>36</sup>

Having identified the ends to the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism and the associated ways to meet those ends, what are the means that will be utilized in strategic execution? Obviously all aspects of national power are available and appropriate for such a comprehensive strategy. The military and intelligence community will play significantly in much of the strategy as will the Department of State in a diplomatic role, not only with nation states,

but with other regional and international institutions as well. The informational aspects of national power will also be relied on heavily to promote democratic ideas and values as well as to de-legitimize terrorist organizations and state sponsors. Economic incentives tied to a nation's performance against terrorist organizations will also be a valuable tool in strategic execution.

But will it work?

#### Analysis and Recommendations

There is very little to quarrel with in the Counter Terrorism Strategy as promulgated when viewed from a Western perspective. It is well nested and embedded with the National Security Strategy and other strategies such as the National Defense Strategy and Homeland Security Strategy and presents a logical course of action for state on state interaction. However, the strategy does appear exceedingly "state centric" in dealing with a transnational issue, whose foundations are set in Muslim extremist religious beliefs. One theory behind the state centric approach is that the USG utilized strategy and policy experts to craft this strategy whose backgrounds were in Soviet and European studies due to a lack of Middle Eastern experts.<sup>37</sup>

Given the negative outlook contained in the United Nations Development Reports over the last three years, there is no question that political, economic, and societal reform is imperative in the Middle East. The United States has undertaken 3 major initiatives in the last two years, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative (BMENA), and finally the Foundation for the Future Project in 2005.<sup>38</sup> Given the negative perception and damaged credibility of the U.S. in the region based on our perceived support for Israel, extra-legal measures in regard to detainees at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and elsewhere, and our perceived excessive use of force in military operations in the region, it has been difficult for these initiatives to gain traction.

Whether one supports the idealist, neoconservative agenda of promoting secular, western style democracy in the Middle East or the realist approach of dealing with whomever can best serve the United States' strategic objectives, there are basically three courses of action available to the United States in shaping the political landscape in the Middle East. None of which will be particularly effective, and all of which assume significant risk in attempting to diminish the spread of Jihadist ideology in the Middle East.

Should the United States continue to back friendly, autocratic regimes such as those found in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, we will continue to be perceived as the patron of corrupt, oppressive, Apostate governments and the Jihadist movement will continue to flourish

regionally, and within those countries. Should the United States decide to truly push for democratic reform in those same countries, undercutting the power base of those regimes, the United States may be perceived by many as an unreliable ally, further damaging our credibility. Finally, what if these countries do enact true diplomatic reform that brings groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Muslim Brotherhood to power? Although democratically elected, these governments will not be mirror images of western style democracies. Western style democracy, with its imperative for a separation of church and state, is not a near term viable alternative in the region. Religion is such a cornerstone of Middle Eastern society that it is impossible to separate the state from Islam. In the opinion of Dr Shurifa Zuhur, “ If the US continues to promote secularism, in one form or another as the antidote to extremist or revivalist Islam, it will not reach hearts and minds.”<sup>39</sup> Middle Eastern democracy will have an Islamic flavor, as secularism is considered to be religiously delinquent.<sup>40</sup> This position is reinforced by F. Gregory Gauss III, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Vermont and Director of Middle East Studies, who contends that democratic regimes will not drain the swamp for extremist support and that any democratically elected government in the Middle East will probably be Islamist in nature. Gauss contends that the Administration needs to take a long term approach to democratic reform and instead of pushing for near term elections, needs to pursue the development of secular representative organizations and infrastructure that can compete in the long term with Islamist parties.<sup>41</sup> In Lebanon and Palestine, both Hezbollah and Hamas have carved out significant representation in national and local elective bodies that are democratically elected but anti U.S.<sup>42</sup> The “Representative Islamist” scenario puts the USG on the horns of a dilemma, on one hand endorsing democratic reform in the Middle East while with the other attempting to set aside results when groups it seeks to destroy in one portion of the strategy, gain power in a democratic process designed to diminish Jihadist influence in another portion of that same strategy.<sup>43</sup> Given our lack of popularity and credibility in the region, Al Qaeda, should it so desire, may be well positioned to attempt to legitimize itself as a viable political alternative to the autocratic regimes it is attempting to destroy. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood have all made the transition from terrorist organizations to political entities. Bin Laden’s initial support to extremist organizations was not as an operational planner or commander, but as a provider of services to refugees and mujihadeen organizations, a course undertaken by both Hezbollah and Hamas in their move toward political legitimacy. It would be an exceptionally ironic and dangerous twist for Al Qaeda to use a portion of the USG’s Strategy for Combating Terrorism against us in order to gain power through the democratic reforms we are attempting to implement as a counter to the Jihadist movement.

The target of our strategy should be neither the nation state, nor necessarily Al Qaeda leadership figures, for the true Jihadist Center of Gravity is the Ummah, or Muslim people - without which extremist organizations cannot operate. The portion of the Ummah we are trying to reach is rarely influenced by the elements of state power, but more often than not by one of two societal relationships, tribalism or clientelism.<sup>44</sup> Tribalism is defined as "the self legitimization of kin group and its intent and endeavor to optimize its collective self interest. Self legitimization is the conviction that the tribe is the beginning and end of loyalty, identity, obligation, purpose, status, honor, past, and future-exclusiveness related to society at large."<sup>45</sup> Unless an individual fully alienates himself from the tribal structure he serves the tribal interest and needs of his kinsmen. If an individual does choose the path of self alienation, the concept of clientelism prevails, where the individual stops acting as a tribesman and unquestionably submits to the authority of preachers or operational leaders. These leaders usually offer the client religious salvation for loyal service within a terrorist or insurgent organization.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the individual is most influenced by the tribal leader or religious interpretations of an Imam with little or no impact by state or national governments in regard to the individual's actions.

Having identified the Ummah as the Jihadist Extremist Center of Gravity, what is the critical vulnerability of Jihadist extremist organizations; a vulnerability that, if exploited, will do the most significant damage to the enemy's ability to resist us"?<sup>47</sup> I would offer that AQAN's critical vulnerability is the negative perception mainstream Muslims have regarding the senseless violence perpetrated by Takfiri influenced elements of the movement. This violence executed against the populace whose support extremists require for success and safe haven, is the true policy strategy mismatch of the AQAN movement.

In a recent Washington Post Editorial, Fawaz Gerges, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies and International Affairs at Sarah Lawrence University, reinforces this position. Dr. Gerges contends that moderate Muslims have begun to push back against extremist movements and this lack of support, based on extremist transgressions, has led to an inhospitable environment for both recruiting and refuge. In support, Dr. Gerges offers interesting documentation from a wide variety of sources within the region:

- In a survey of more than 1000 Jordanians conducted for the newspaper al-Ghad, 87 percent now considered Al Qaeda a terrorist organization.
- The recent 3<sup>rd</sup> annual gathering of Sunni Islamic Religious Scholars, rebuked Zarqawi, by calling on all resistance fighters to respect Islam's rules of war, which forbid targeting civilians, including foreigners.

- The Grand Imam of al- Azhar Mosque in Cairo, Sheik Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, widely regarded as one of the most hallowed religious institutions in the Islamic world, has called on the international community to put an end to terrorism in Iraq and to punish Zarqawi and his men for killing civilians.
- In two separate statements, the imprisoned leaders of the Egyptian Islamic Group and Islamic al-Jihad, the two largest Jihadist organizations, have also denounced Zarqawi and accused him of attempting to annihilate the Shia vice liberate Iraq.
- In a commentary for al-Jazeera, a leading Islamic activist, Yasir al-Zā'atira comments that the very existence of al Qaeda is at stake; the organization's survival depending on whether bin Laden and Zarqawi are prepared to reassess their deeds to be in line with the consensus of the Ummah.<sup>48</sup>

The National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism (NMSP-WOT) seems to accept Dr Gerge's position and calls for the U.S. government to amplify the voices of mainstream Muslims that oppose extremists. The strategy also calls for interaction with moderate elements of the Muslim Ulema, or religious community and for religious leaders to lend their voices in an effort to strengthen the perception within the Muslim world that extremist actions significantly undermine the well-being of the community. Finally, per the NMSP-WOT, only when Muslims, through reflection and introspection, come to realize this fact will they begin to lead the fight against extremists in their ranks.<sup>49</sup>

Implementation of this portion of the strategy will require both sensitivity and sophistication. In the words of John W. Jandora, "Few Americans have the knowledge to critique the tenet of Takfir (as it justifies Muslims conducting Jihad against other Muslims) or Sayyid Qutbs' construct of the "Universal Islamic Concept". Even those who do would have virtually no credibility with a Muslim audience since they would immediately be dismissed as Westerners or Infidels regardless of their credentials. The task must be shared with Muslim intellectuals who do have the credibility to critique extremist ideology, yet need the technical assistance in information warfare America can offer."<sup>50</sup> Dr Zuhur also seems to accept this approach citing several examples of individuals well positioned within the Muslim community with the credentials to effectively promote more moderate positions, such as liberal, neo salafist, journalist, and Muslim thinker Fahmi Huwaydi, who promotes pluralism and opposes extremists because they do not.<sup>51</sup>

Al Qaeda's recent actions, based on Takfiri religious influence, give the United States an opportunity to positively effect moderate Muslim perceptions regarding the extremist movement. However, without effectively engaging moderate religious leaders, accurately articulating the

United States intentions in the region, and then implementing a long term strategy of representative vice western democratic reform based on Muslim culture, the portion of the strategy designed to diminish extremist/Jihadist ideology is destined for failure.

As previously stated, any U.S. led campaign to separate the extremists from the Ummah through interpretation of the tenants of Islam will not resonant well on the Arab street. A possible alternative is the use of the Arab League. Although historically considered only marginally effective in dealing with regional issues, the Arab League could act as a bridge between the West and Islamic religious scholars. Given the popularity of satellite TV in the Middle East the Arab League could sponsor televised debates and discussions between religious leaders and scholars that focus on the more peaceful and moderate elements of Islamic belief, and discounts and discredits the actions of extremists. Weekly televised panel discussions with a format loosely based on shows such as "Face the Nation" or the "McLaughlin Group" could be used as a platform for these issues and they should be carried on both al Arabiya and al Jazeera. This approach is a variation of one of fourteen different themes proposed by Dr. Zuhur in her most recent monograph, *A Hundred Osama's: Islamist Threats and the Future of Counterinsurgency*.<sup>52</sup> While her stated approach is more comprehensive in that it utilizes a wide variety of communications mediums to include print, web, radio and television, my limited experience in the region has led me to believe that television seems to be the most widely watched, reputable and effective medium for undertaking a strategy to discredit extremist beliefs and actions.

While it is important for the Ummah to reconsider their religious positions, equally important is how the Ummah perceives the US and our actions in the region. The first two lines of operation in The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism center on a "find, fix, and finish" – and some would say "further radicalize" – mindset, that while vital to ensuring our national security does further alienate a certain percentage of the Ummah. In an effort to counter-balance the effects of kinetic operations, the US must stay engaged in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance operations in the Muslim world. The actions of Joint Task Force (JTF) 510, operating against the Abu Sayyaf terrorist organization on Basilan Island in the southern Philippines is an outstanding example of what is achievable in operations of this type. The JTF executed a series of projects, ranging from road, school, and water treatment plant construction, Med and Dencap operations, and the training of Philippine military units. The access these operations provided and the good will they generated, isolated the terrorists, significantly enhanced the quality of Human intelligence, turned the majority of the population from

supporting extremist organizations, and pushed Abu Sayyaf from the major islands and population centers in the southern Philippines.<sup>53</sup>

Another superb example of operations of this type is the “Chinook Diplomacy” being exercised by US forces in Pakistan’s earth quake devastated North-West Frontier Province, long a safe haven for Al Qaeda associated extremist elements. In coordination with other elements of the US government and international aid organizations, US forces have flown over 16,000 sorties, carried 6000 passengers and delivered 6,000 tons of aid to the area in addition to establishing two field hospitals on the ground. Once again our actions seem to be gaining converts with young Pakistani children playing with toy CH-47s and a Kashmiri Imam being heckled by his followers for denouncing the US in a recent prayer session. In the words of one Pakistani businessman, “Pakistan is not a nation of ingrates. We know where the help is coming from”.<sup>54</sup>

In conclusion, while the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism is well crafted and articulated for influencing the actions of other nation states, protecting the homeland, and defeating militarily terrorist organizations, it lacks sufficient understanding of Muslim culture and the societal factors that incite extremism to counter the propagation of Jihadist ideology over the long term. While the strategy will positively affect the behavior of almost any nation state that harbors terrorist organizations, organizations such as Al Qaeda have a long history of being able to operate in a country without sponsorship or fear of apprehension because of the tacit approval of the people. Without reaching out to the Ummah through moderate religious leaders and accurately describing and demonstrating the United States intentions via public diplomacy and humanitarian assistance in an attempt to de-legitimize the actions of the Jihadist movement, our strategy may bring the entities to power that we are attempting to defeat.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 319-320.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 471.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua L. Gleis, National Security Implications of Al afar Wal Hijra. Al Nakhlah-The Fletcher School Online Journal for Issues related to Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization, Article 3, Spring 2005 (Medford, MA: Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University). [http://fletcher.tufts.edu/al\\_nakhlah/archives/spring2005/gleis.pdf](http://fletcher.tufts.edu/al_nakhlah/archives/spring2005/gleis.pdf) accessed 29 November, 2005.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Danner, "Taking Stock of the Forever War," *The New York Times Magazine*, 11 September, 2005, 48.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

<sup>12</sup> Danner, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz, 595-596.

<sup>14</sup> Danner, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Matloff, "Allied Strategy in Europe," *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Townsend, *Oxford Illustrated History of Modern War* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997) 177-197.

<sup>17</sup> J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967) 22-27.

<sup>18</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart. *Strategy* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1965), 321.

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<sup>20</sup> Danner, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Michael F. Morris, "Al-Qaeda as Insurgency," in *Theory of War and Strategy*, ed. Dept of National Security and Strategy. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College), 479.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 480.

<sup>23</sup> George W. Bush, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2003), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 24-28.

<sup>37</sup> Sherifa Zuhur, *A Hundred Osamas: Islamist Threats and the Future of Counterinsurgency* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 15.

<sup>38</sup> David Gorvin, "Arab's Democracy Dialogue: A Progress Report", 16 Nov 2005, linked from *Open Democracy, free thinking for the World*, available at [www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net). Internet accessed 2 December, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Zuhur, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>41</sup> F. Gregory Gauss III, "Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" *Foreign Affairs*, 84, (September/October 2005); available from [Http://foreignaffairs.org](http://foreignaffairs.org); internet; accessed 29 November 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Hugh Miles, "West's Dilemma over Middle East Democracy", *BBC News World edition*, 1 Sept 2005. Available from [Http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4205950.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4205950.stm) accessed 2 December 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>44</sup> John W. Jandora, "Center of Gravity and Asymmetric Conflict: Factoring in Culture,", *Joint Force Quarterly* 39, (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2005):, 79.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 79.

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<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of the Navy, *Warfighting*, Marine Corp Doctrinal Publication-1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Navy, 1997), 47.

<sup>48</sup> Fawaz Gerges, "Buried in Amman's Rubble: Zarqawi's Support," *Washington Post*, 4 December, 2005, B3.

<sup>49</sup> JCS J-5 NMSP-WOT, 18 Apr 05, slide 15.

<sup>50</sup> Jandora, 82.

<sup>51</sup> Zuhur, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>53</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts* (New York: Random House, 2005) 131-184.

<sup>54</sup> Bret Stephens, "Chinook Diplomacy", *Wall Street Journal*, 22 December, 2005, 14.